

# IDEOLOGY AND CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION IN INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION

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Information literacy instruction traditionally focuses on evaluating a source for bias, relevance, and timeliness, and rightfully so; this critical perspective is vital to a well-formed research process. However, this process is incomplete without a similar focus on the potential biases that the student brings to his or her interactions with information. This paper describes a case study of a semester-long information literacy course that utilized neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's figurations of ideology and ideological state apparatuses as a site of critical self-reflection for students and a method by which students could become empowered to recognize themselves as not just consumers, but shapers of discourse.

Communications in  
**INFORMATION LITERACY**

[THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

## INTRODUCTION

*The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015) has asserted that information literacy “depends on...metacognition, or critical self-reflection.” In the *Framework*, this critical self-reflection comes in the form of, among other things, “understand[ing] the responsibility that comes with entering the conversation through participatory channels”, “valu[ing] intellectual curiosity”, “develop[ing] and maintain[ing] an open mind when encountering varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives”, and being “conscious that maintaining these actions and attitudes require frequent self-evaluation.”

These descriptions of critical self-reflection paint a picture of an active learner who understands that his or her perspectives (and potential biases) can disrupt and shape the meaning-making process of research. That the *Framework* privileged this disposition as vital to being considered “information literate” is encouraging, as so much of the practical work of information literacy instruction focuses on evaluation as an outward-looking act; instead of asking, “how might my viewpoints affect how I use this information?” the question is often only “how does the author’s viewpoints affect how he or she presents information?”

The *Framework* is meant to be a document that informs the shaping of pedagogy rather than a pedagogy itself. Though much improved in revision and in its emphasis on the very affective process of critical self-reflection, the *Framework* does not go far enough in asserting how information creation and consumption is tied to power,

perception, and politics (Seale, 2013; Bales and Engle, 2012). A fair response to this criticism could be that the *Framework* has been designed to be purposefully broad and open to adaptation and interpretation. As such, there is room in the discussion of critical self-reflection to include an examination of one’s own meaning-making process, and how understanding the social, political, and cultural forces that shape and filter information is a means of empowerment. In that spirit, this paper will outline how the author utilized the concept of ideology (by way of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser) as a site of critical self-reflection and source of empowerment in a semester-long information literacy course.

## CRITICAL FOUNDATIONS

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2003) writes that the formation of a critical consciousness, or conscientization, is the process of recognizing that a learning person is not yet fully formed but becomes more human through his or her education. Freire eschewed the traditional “banking” system of education wherein knowledge is directive and static. Critical pedagogy instead positions the student to be an agent of his or her own learning and formation. Here, the process of learning is personal and considerate of the ways that certain social, political, and cultural forces serve as pillars of oppression for students. In this sense, critical pedagogy is a tool for social justice perhaps more so than it is an educational philosophy. Critical pedagogy also allows students to give their experience a larger local, national, and global context. Seeing themselves as citizens of the world affords them certain responsibilities to be proactive, informed, and unambivalent.

## [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

Elmborg (2006) asserted that the purpose of information literacy should be to institute a “critical consciousness” in students. One might also think of this critical consciousness as the critical self-reflection that is foundational to the *Framework’s* definition of information literacy. “By developing critical consciousness, students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and to the world around them” (Elmborg, p. 193). This suggests a responsibility of information literacy not only to study the means by which students interpret information, but also to shape that individual system of interpretation into a critical consciousness.

The project detailed in this paper can be situated in literature that cautions the practicing librarian against perpetuating the oppressive dominant ideologies that are often espoused by higher education.<sup>1</sup> In his discussion of ideology in discursive practice, Budd (2001) defines ideology as “being grounded in efforts at domination—the ascendancy of some ideas over others” (p. 498). Olson and Fox (2010) explore ideology as a “conceptual construct” in LIS practice through the lens of philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who writes about the roles that intellectuals (and, and Olson and Fox argue, librarians) play in “producing official explanations that make up state ideology” (p. 304). Spivak encourages “custodians of culture” to work against perpetuating the status quo by being aware of the role that they play in the formation of ideology and making efforts to disrupt it (p. 304).

Bales and Engle (2011) concur, asserting

that often, “...those in places of power within the academy may simply be aligning themselves with the dominant ideologies of the institution and not analyzing their behaviors and assumptions...” (p. 17). Cushla Kaptizke (2003) critiques the traditional “operational approach” of information literacy that “emphasizes the consumption of information but lacks metaknowledge because it neglects the sociocultural, historical and ideological processes of knowledge construction and justification” (p. 46.) This approach, she argues, misrepresents information literacy as “unproblematic, atheoretical, and apolitical” (p. 47).

Budd (2001) writes that “[t]he purpose of examining ideology is the growth of knowledge, including ethical knowledge” (p. 498). He continues, “...ideological discourse asserts, in some ways, the truth and good of a particular idea, policy, or vision of the future” (p. 515). The more we study ideology, the more we reveal the ways it both consciously and subconsciously shapes how we think and feel about information. In imposing truth and morality on a “particular idea” ideology determines that idea’s value by how effective (often in economic or mechanistic terms) its output might be (Budd, p. 515). In the classroom, this neoliberal focus on results excludes the affective and political dimensions of information, and constructs a false sense of reality for students. Being critically self-reflective about one’s personal ideology and the larger dominant ideologies that inform structures of research and knowing in the information literacy classroom allows students to see through that false sense of reality and construct a more nuanced and critical understanding of how information is

## [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

created and to what ends it is used. Moreover, when students are conscious of the roles they play as makers of meaning in this discourse, they can become empowered to challenge the oppression they identify.

The explicit focus on ideology in the course outlined later in this paper is an effort to encourage students to engage in the process of critical self-reflection. Moreover, it is the means by which the author as an instructor and person in a position of power can call attention to the educational system as a potential oppressive force and information literacy as a fundamentally theory-laden and political process.

Overall, an examination of ideology as a site of the development of a critical consciousness for students has not been done in professional LIS literature. However, it follows that if intellectuals and librarians can make efforts to change problematic ideologies simply by being aware of the role they play in participating in and constructing ideology, students can be empowered to make those changes as well.

## BACKGROUND

Located in Carrollton, GA, the University of West Georgia (UWG) is a regional comprehensive university of almost 12,000 students. The faculty librarians who work at UWG teach almost 700 students a year in over thirty sections of a 2-credit hour information literacy course, LIBR 1101: Academic Research and the Library. This course can be taken as a part of the general education curriculum. Each spring, UWG offers a section of LIBR 1101 for students in the university Honors Program. Although

this section of LIBR 1101 has to adhere to the course's shared learning outcomes, it has evolved over the years into a section built around a theme that also aligns with the instructor's particular research interests or areas of expertise (e.g., digital storytelling, media literacy, news literacy).

When given the opportunity to teach the Honors section of the course for the first time in Spring 2013, the author designed the curriculum around the theme of critical media literacy, a term defined by Kellner and Share (2007) as "an educational response that expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies" (p. 60). The expansive and interdisciplinary field of cultural studies served as a foundation for the structure of this course, focusing on what was deemed "pillars of media literacy." These pillars included cultural hegemony (by way of Antonio Gramsci), representation (by way of Stuart Hall), rhetoric, and ideology (by way of Louis Althusser.)

When the author taught the Honors section of the course again in Spring 2014, it was alongside a colleague, and with an expanded focus on both media and news literacy. In the 2014 section of the course, the instructors de-emphasized the cultural studies framework as such, but still focused on ideology as a foundational principle, especially as the language students could use to express the ways in which their personal and political viewpoints affected how they interpreted information. This case study will focus specifically on the pedagogical underpinnings of examining ideology as the means by which the lens was turned back on the student-as-consumer

## [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

of information in both sections of this course.

## DEFINING IDEOLOGY

“Ideology” was not a wholly unfamiliar term or concept to students, at least as they understood it to mean a group of shared practices and beliefs. Before the class interrogated the concept with any depth, the LIBR 1101 students in both sections of the course were able to articulate to some extent that ideologies were things that they believed, usually political ideologies.

For instruction librarians focusing on helping students understand the ways that they interface with information, this is an acceptable and useful initial figuration of the concept of ideology, especially in terms of being able to frame and discuss political and social beliefs and the ways those beliefs might interfere with an unbiased consideration of information. However, it does not fully capture the way that ideology functions for individuals in the meaning-making process. Outside of creating bias, thinking about ideology as “the things one believes” seems relatively harmless; it is something to be aware of, but not something necessarily harmful.

However, when examined through the lens of the work of Althusser (1971), among others, ideology becomes exposed as that which represents the “imaginary relationship to our real conditions of existence” (p. 109). In other words, ideology hides the real world from people by “interpellating”<sup>2</sup> them to adopt certain beliefs and values that have no inherent value. Moreover, Althusser reinforces the ways in which ideology has a “material

existence”; that is to say, ideology is not something that exists only in thoughts, it is something that is actualized in daily actions and practices (p. 112).

Storey (2006) describes this working understanding of ideology in its Marxist context: “Ideology...indicate[s] how some texts and practices present distorted images of reality...Such distortions, it is argued, work in the interests of the powerful against the interests of the powerless” (p. 2). Ideology becomes something to actively challenge when it is in service to oppressive and pervasive social forces. Antonio Gramsci conceives of cultural hegemony as a method wherein the ruling class normalizes values and worldviews that perpetuate its maintenance or acquisition of power. These dominant ideologies become the social, cultural, and political status quo, and, in essence, the means by which people tacitly consent to being oppressed.

Ideologies are inculcated through ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which are institutions that include family, religion, the media, and school. In the modern age, education has replaced the church as the primary ISA. Althusser considers this especially pernicious, as education perpetuates oppressive capitalist ideology while under the guise of being a “...neutral environment purged of ideology” (p.106).

## IDEOLOGY AND CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

Examining how ideology functions in society was not only conceived of as content in the course, a term or concept to internalize and apply. It was also meant to be a skill that students could use towards

cultivating their critical consciousness. Ideology as a site for critical self-reflection allows one to shift from what James Gee (2001) calls a student's primary discourse, or that which "...constitutes our original and home-based sense of identity..." (p. 526) to the secondary, academic discourse which is a site for critical reflection and change.

This primary discourse is "[acquired] not by overt instruction, but by being a member of a primary socializing group" (Gee, 2001, p. 527). Gee's primary socializing group can also be conceived of as an ISA. By explicitly examining where these primary discourses—these ideologies—come from, they are exposed as constructed. In other words, if students recognized that their values were not inherent, then they might be more open to confronting the previously unexamined and unchallenged conditions of their existence.

The active application of theory in the information literacy classroom is work towards the adoption of the secondary discourse, meant to prepare students for the expectations of a level of critical reflection in their academic work. More so, it is an active effort towards praxis, which Freire describes as action informed by theory towards the end of transformation (2003, p.19). A simple recognition of one's own biases and/or unconscious work in perpetuating oppressive dominant ideologies might not seem as active or transformative in a Freirean sense, but, as Olson and Fox (2010) and Bales and Engle (2012) note, it can be a powerful first step, especially because shifting from a primary to a secondary discourse can be a difficult process. Very often these discourses are at odds with each other; Gee writes that the

secondary, academic discourse often involves "active complicity with values that conflict with one's home- and community-based discourses" (2001, p. 532).

The difficulty and importance of shifting from a primary to a secondary discourse by reckoning with one's ideologies situates this process as a threshold concept. Meyer and Land (2003) define a threshold concept as "...a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress" (p. 1). The definitions and body of knowledge of information literacy are a constant site of disagreement and reconciliation among practitioners, so here, threshold concepts represent "way[s] of thinking and practicing" the processes and concepts that underlie the discipline (p. 1). Townsend, Brunetti, and Hofer (2011) write that for information literacy, threshold concepts are an "...acknowledgment of the more complex and interesting content beneath the surface of information literacy's list of tasks and processes, and a simpler way to uncover and explain that complexity" (p. 858).

The *Framework* has identified a number of foundational information literacy threshold concepts, and although, as noted above, critical self-reflection is a fundamental aspect of these revisions, an explicit reflection on personal ideology has not been articulated.

The specific focus on ideology in this course was intended to create a metacognitive space where students were able to reflect on what ISAs shaped their views of the world and affected how they privileged certain sources of information. Most students in the course had never

## [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

thought meaningfully about where their values and viewpoints came from, or that these influences might be in service of oppressive dominant ideologies. With this knowledge, students were empowered to begin the process of disrupting certain structures that kept them from thinking and acting critically both in their classes and also in the larger, politically fraught global exchange of information that they have access to online.

To actualize a praxis of this theory in the classroom, students had several scaffolded assignments to first introduce the concepts, then to give those concepts meaning and context, and, finally, to internalize those concepts through personal reflection.

### IDEOLOGY IN THE INFORMATION LITERACY CLASSROOM: ACTUALIZING A PRAXIS

Students were introduced to ideology as a class framework through reflective exercises designed to create a personal point of reference and to make an abstract and often intimidating concept seem more concrete and personally meaningful. The course approached theory by asserting that students were already thinking about these concepts to a certain extent and in a certain context. The classwork gave students a vocabulary that they could use to more thoughtfully and consciously apply and communicate about those concepts.

Before the students started interrogating the concept, they needed to have a shared understanding of its meaning. Students in the 2013 section of LIBR 1101 first confronted ideology in a homework assignment wherein they reflected on what

the term “ideology” meant personally to them. In the 2014 section, this portion of the assignment was expanded to include having students find encyclopedic definitions of the word, and comparing their personal definition to the more contextualized encyclopedia definition. This gave students an opportunity to recognize that ideology, perhaps, had a deeper meaning and application than they had originally thought. One student found a definition in an encyclopedia that focused on group psychology and communication that explored more deeply the way that a shared system of beliefs affected interpersonal relationships. The student noted thoughtfully that this characterization of ideology as something difficult to escape might be something that causes systemic prejudice.

In the same assignment, students reviewed a video where author Douglas Lain (2011) described Althusser’s somewhat complex figuration of ideology to his young daughter in a relatively simplified way. Students were then asked to create two thought-provoking discussion questions to respond to this video. These questions could have reflected something they thought was interesting, or something that they did not understand. Students questioned Althusser’s belief that fantasy was a fundamental aspect of functioning in society, wondered at the relationships between ideologies and stereotypes, and also asked how people were able to live together if they all had different or opposing personal ideologies.

Many of these questions might have been addressed before the class discussion if there was an opportunity to read and unpack the Althusser article itself, but there was not

### [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

time for that level of engagement in the course. Because this was not a philosophy course, the students approached the use of theory by studying interpretations rather than the central text itself. This is an obvious drawback in the methodology, but a necessary one due to time restraints and the scope of the class.

The class session that followed this homework assignment in both the 2013 and 2014 sections started with a small group exercise that asked students to discuss basic questions about Althusser's figuration of ideology. This gave all the students an opportunity to work out basic misunderstandings about the homework assignment in a less intimidating environment, and it gave students who did not complete the homework assignment a chance to catch up with those who did. After the small group discussion, the students generated questions which became the basis of a discussion with the whole class. Specifically, students discussed the relationship between ideology and research, and why the course focused so intently on understanding this concept.

Although the terminology and underlying theory was not explicitly invoked in class, this discussion was crafted through the lens of Althusser's concept of the "problematic," which asserts that a text can only be understood in its ideological context. That is to say, as Storey (2006) writes, "Althusser argues that if we are to fully understand the meaning of a text, we have to be aware of not only what is in a text but also the assumptions which inform it" (p. 57). To extend this concept to the work they would be doing engaging with resources in an information literacy class, students began

from a place that assumed that all the texts they interacted with—from scholarly article to popular magazine to government document to television news program—had been filtered through an ideology. If students wanted to use an identified resource fully and thoughtfully, they had to do what Althusser called a "symptomatic reading" of that text. A symptomatic reading is an analysis of not just what is presented on the surface level, but also a reading of the underlying meanings which indicate the presence of an ideology. The work of information literacy has characterized this as evaluation, but conceiving of it on a deeper level as an examination of the problematic provides a method with which one can systematically identify bias and underlying connections.

Studying ideology-as-problematic became the framework for the course and the way that students reflected on all of their interactions with information, both outward-looking—"What is the author trying to convey in this text?"—and inward-looking—"How are my interpretations of this text filtered through my ideologies?"

Both the 2013 and 2014 sections of the course followed up the work students did to define and personalize ideology with a discussion of hegemony, which, as noted above, functions through the normalization of dominant ideologies. The class was designed to be concerned largely with the ways in which cultural hegemony co-opts the media apparatus in order to privilege certain dominant ideologies. As with the reflective exercise that introduced the concept of ideology, the class analysis of hegemony began with a homework assignment that asked students do some

## [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

searching on Google in order to craft a basic understanding of the concept. Students then came into class and worked in small groups to refine their understanding of how hegemony shaped their interactions with information.

Students discussed the relationship between the media and hegemony and identified what dominant ideologies are privileged and perpetuated in American society. They found that many dominant ideologies were practices in which they thoughtlessly, and even enthusiastically, engaged. Both classes responded strongly to “the American dream” as a hegemonic narrative, as it was a concept with which they were all familiar, and in which they all believed. This led to productive conversations about the concept of a meritocracy and how the American dream, for all that it was problematic, was fundamental to the formation and productivity of the country. It was a useful example to illustrate the real ways that hegemony had shaped culture in American society. Thinking about these practices prepared the students to engage with the news texts and related assignments they were going to encounter in throughout the semester.

Students in both sections revisited the concepts of ideology and hegemony throughout the semester in a number of different assignments. In the 2013 section of the course, students completed media literacy responses in which they engaged in a more in-depth way with one of the class pillars of media literacy. For the assignment that focused on ideology, students listened to an episode of the radio show *On the Media*<sup>3</sup> and explored the way that the media functions as an ideological state apparatus.

The media literacy response that focused on hegemony asked students to watch an hour of primetime television and analyze the way that dominant ideologies are presented and perpetuated as entertainment.

Students in the 2014 section had to complete a storytelling assignment where they analyzed the ways that stories and narratives perpetuated certain ideologies. Each student created a podcast in which they told a personal story that responded to one of three prompts, one of which explicitly asked them to detail a person or situation that shaped a particular personal ideology. Students then had to create a rubric for the instructors and their groupmates to assess their work, focusing on elements that they believed made a narrative affecting and persuasive. This storytelling assignment was given near the beginning of the semester and instructors and students found themselves returning to its themes consistently. It was effective in communicating to students the ways in which appeals to emotion were persuasive, if not consciously manipulative.

It should be noted that the limitations of time and course focus made it so that there was not an opportunity to examine criticisms of Althusser's figuration of ideology in depth, or even other cultural theorists with legitimate methods of critical self-reflection. It would be self-defeating and hypocritical to privilege this one perspective over all others, so the LIBR 1101 instructors made a conscious effort to cultivate an environment where students felt safe to disagree with what they were reading and reflecting about. The instructors built in questions that would encourage students to challenge Althusser and Gramsci, especially

## [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

in the ways that these concepts positioned those students as passive: e.g., "Hegemony is predicated on complicity, do you think you are being complicit?" and "In what ways do you (or can you) resist?" Being reflective about the formation of one's identity was not meant to end at the reflection, it was meant to inspire empowerment and action.

## CONCLUSIONS

The courses outlined in this paper were not designed with the *Framework* or with threshold concepts in mind, but as noted, the inward-focus on the student and the formation of his or her personal ideology by way of critical self-reflection seems to meet the characteristics of a threshold concept. Meyer & Land (2003) define these characteristics as being transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, and troublesome. When they engaged in critical self-reflection, students' understandings of research as a straightforward, uncomplicated process were transformed as they began to understand the role that their thoughts and feelings played in making meaning, as well as the hegemonic structures that underpinned the research with which they were interacting. Students continued to identify hegemonic and ISA-related discourses throughout the semester, even when they weren't required to. Instructors felt that these were concepts that students would integrate into their experiences in other courses as well. Students even noted that they had begun to see the concepts they explored in class in practice in the world everywhere, often to their displeasure, which is evidence that their worldview had changed. As a fundamentally interdisciplinary concept, it

is difficult to characterize the ways in which the work was bounded outside of the fact that students adopted, often enthusiastically, the terminology associated with the Marxist approach used in the course.

What resonated most, perhaps, was also the area with which the students had the most problems. Being critically self-reflective about the ways that their ideologies were constructed required that they had to acknowledge that many of the beliefs they held dear were not inherently true. When students discussed the American Dream in class, many of them seemed depressed, and much of the conversation focused on students trying to discern if there were situations in which it might be legitimate. After discussing that Althusser believed our ideologies were imaginary, other students asked exasperatedly how they would know what was true or if anything was true. These were the hardest, most troublesome ideas the class discussed throughout the semester, but they were consistently revisited and used as examples.

Much of the work of getting students over the threshold to understand that research was an affective process in which they were constructing and interpreting meaning through the lens of their personal beliefs and lived experiences was conceptual. That is to say, the focus of the course was on ideas and reflection more so than a discussion of the mechanics of searching and research tools. Skills like demonstrating how to use databases and differentiating between primary and secondary sources were incidental to the broader, more theoretical work. What is often considered the traditional curriculum of information literacy instruction was contextually situated

## [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]

in a larger research process where the goal was the development of an idea, or a habit-of-mind, rather than the acquisition of some kind of research product (e.g., a paper or a grade).

This process required an entire semester to build on ideas, refine understandings, and make connections between the work of the course and one's personal and academic life, and it probably still was not enough. As the other threshold concepts in the *Framework* are similarly conceptual—even the “Searching as Strategic Exploration” frame—they would be best explored in extended interactions with students, either in a semester-long class, or as a part of a thoughtful, scaffolded information literacy instruction program in which the librarian educator had the time and space to foster active discussion and build in time for reflection. Students in LIBR 1101 did not suffer for a lack of training on databases; instead, they created a workflow in which they knew what tools and resources to use to help them respond to a specific question or information need that arose organically, at a point of need.

If educators wish for students to meaningfully internalize the concepts outlined in the *Framework*, those contexts and concepts of research should be the focus of instruction rather than a side note in an instruction session focused on the tools and mechanics of research.

## NOTES

1. These “oppressive dominant ideologies” include, but are not limited to, neoliberalism, patriarchy, and meritocracy. The field of critical pedagogy was more or

less a response to these ideologies, and a roadmap of resistance, in a sense. In particular, critical pedagogue Henry Giroux has written extensively on Neoliberalism and education.

2. Althusser used the term “interpellation” to refer to the ways that people adopt certain behaviors and beliefs. In other words, interpellation is how we internalize the ideologies that guide our lives. This is a relatively complex idea that Althusser explored in more depth in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes on an Investigation.”

3. On the Media available at <http://www.onthemedia.org/>

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## [THOUGHTS ON THE FRAMEWORK]